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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Free Research in Fearful Times: Conceptualizing an Index to Monitor Academic Freedom*

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ABSTRACT

Scholars across the globe are increasingly victims of repression due to their involvement in critical knowledge production. Studies have pointed to the connection between this worrying trend and processes of global authoritarian regression illustrating how the curtailment of academic freedom is often a harbinger of broader human rights violations. Less work has gone into systematizing and categorising the ways how spaces for critical inquiry are curtailed. Concise catalogues that map the defining features of academic freedom in an exhaustive way and could provide the basis for systematic comparative investigation are conspicuously absent. This article intends to fill this gap by outlining the conceptual architecture of a comprehensive Academic Freedom Index (AFI). Spelling out a methodological path towards reliable parameters for assessing the regulation and restriction of research autonomy over time and on a cross-country level, it hopes to stir methodological debate and introduce a powerful instrument for advocacy.

KEYWORDS: Academic freedom; repression; freedom indices; measurement; #veritapergiulioregeni

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1. Introduction and Relevance

Critical intellectuals have long faced political persecution. In recent years, however, their situation has reached a crisis point. Academic communities are increasingly victims of repression, as numerous reports by NGOs and associations providing assistance to persecuted researchers vividly document (e.g., Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack 2014; Institute for International Education 2014; Jarecki & Kaisth 2009; Scholars at Risk 2016, 2017). Scholars are leaving their homes as refugees at levels unseen since the scientific exodus from Nazi-occupied Europe (Labi 2014). The war in Syria alone has displaced at least 2,000 scholars (Hattam 2017). Often they are also specifically targeted either due to their ability to produce knowledge that threatens established tenets (Rochford 2003; Turner 1988; van Ginkel 2002), or because the quest for knowledge itself is being perceived as a threat by governments embarking on an increasingly authoritarian path.

Innovation and critique, the foundations of research and science, in essence imply a challenge to the orthodoxy and a hegemonic status quo. 'Existing entrenched interests' therefore tend to use any means at their disposal to resist this challenge (Preece 1991, p. 33). How this reactionary trend plays out may differ as – among other things – regime type and capacity, ideology, and cost-benefit calculations shape the contours of repression and restrictions (Davenport 2005, p. xv). Accordingly, the relationship of universities to authoritarian regimes has been characterized by different dimensions of subservience and resistance during the last century (Connelly & Grüttner 2005). At times, higher education faculties have provided a safe haven to intellectuals insulating them against the reach of the state, serving as beacons of cultural and political activism (Plesu 1995); at others, scholars were particularly impacted by repression and restrictive policies, as universities were turned into incubators for regime ideology and training grounds for its elites. Generally, however, it is recognised that the curtailment of academic freedom foreshadows broader human rights violations (Karran 2009b). In fact, critical scholarship is bound to be at odds with authoritarian policies due to what Connelly has described as their historic incompatibility: 'What seems to make the juxtaposition of dictator-

ship and university interesting is academic freedom: dictatorships destroy it, universities need it' (Connelly 2005, p. 2).

Conceiving of academic freedom merely as a component of free speech is hence insufficient, because it neither accounts for the augmented importance that it assumes for the profession (Turner 1988, p. 107), nor for the inherent vulnerability of academia as a largely state funded and heavily regulated sector (Butler 2017). Repression cuts through academic institutions like a hot knife through butter. Accordingly, due to the authoritarian regression in ever more parts of the world, the spaces for critical inquiry are shrinking (Saliba & Grimm 2016; Selenica 2014). From the perspective of authoritarian elites facing criticism from scholars, the potential gains from restricting critical academics by tightening controls over the free flow of information often outweigh the costs of repressive measures (Marginson 1997). At the same time, academic institutions are often powerless to resist, due to their dependence on official funds: To a large part, scholars are public employees which makes them particularly exposed to restrictions by the authorities. Even if employed at private universities researchers are likely to receive public funding, which ultimately puts them at the mercy of the ruling governments – if not individually, at least institutionally. This is exacerbated by the fact that also private universities depend on some form of official accreditation to offer their services. This provides an open flank to governments seeking to control academic research on their territory.

The case of the Hungarian Higher Education Act – 'Lex CEU' – is an emblematic example for this trend. Passed by the Hungarian government on April 4, 2017 despite public protest, the law was specifically drawn up to target the renowned Central European University (CEU), a private higher institution of education that had been operating for 25 years. Clearly illustrating the intimate connection between attacks on the independence of research and the state of democratic values, the Higher Education Act turned CEU into a symbol for academic freedom (Corbett & Gordon 2017).

Meanwhile, further to the East, in Turkey, the restriction of academic freedom has taken an even more dramatic form amid a 'cleansing' of the public sec-

tor (Özkirimli 2017). Professors and lecturers from nearly all universities have been targets of prosecution due to alleged ties to the Gülen movement, which the government blames for the July 15, 2016 military coup. The continuous extension of emergency laws has allowed the president to issue a plethora of decrees, which have cost thousands of scholars at higher education institutions their job. Additionally, thousands of teachers and educators have been dismissed.[1] This 'intellectual massacre' (Pamuk & Toksabay 2017) has hit all disciplines and has put independent and free research and teaching at Turkish universities at risk.

The targeting of scholars at their field-research sites has also impacted on the research ecologies in their home countries. A dual trend has emerged: On the one hand, the infringement on academics' rights in Hungary, Turkey or Egypt has prompted unseen levels of solidarity abroad. 2017 witnessed a strong politicization of student and academic bodies, which has manifested itself, above all, at the grassroots level. The global 'March for Science' on April 22, 2017, for instance, succeeded in mobilising protesters against scientists' increasingly precarious status in over 600 demonstrations on all continents (Milman 2017).

On the other hand, this transnational solidarity is contrasted by a protectionist turn at the institutional level. Universities' reactions to recent cases of arrested and killed researchers have been overwhelmingly retreatist. The case of Giulio Regeni in Egypt was a watershed moment in this regard (see Russo 2016). Since the forced disappearance and murder of the Italian PhD student, social science faculties in particular have become more reluctant to approve fieldwork missions in hostile environments. Spearheaded by centres for graduate studies in Cambridge, London, Berlin, Paris and Florence, many higher education institutions in the Global North have revised their risk assessment policies and raised the clearance level for fieldwork missions. In some cases, such as in Great Britain, this move signals a return to earlier research practices marked by a strict formalization of visa and field mission approval procedures for outgoing researchers. In others, such as

[1] Detailed statistical updates of the purge are provided by the turkeypurge journalist collective at https://turkeypurge.com/purge-in-numbers.

in Germany or Italy, heightened cautiousness and the implementation of tighter controls over fieldwork mark a new trend. It follows, above all, from the recognition of an institutional responsibility and the realization that supervisors may be unable to fulfil their duty of care towards students investigating contentious topics abroad (Elmes 2016).[2] And it has been worsened by the added costs of insuring researchers in hostile environments properly. Albeit plausible in the institutional logic, the consequences of the policies arising from these considerations for knowledge production are detrimental: Leaving scholars to choose between self-imposed exile or shifting focus to less contentious topics, the research lockdown on states that are deemed as risky evidently limits the freedom of research.

While these examples are all evident cases of academic freedom being restricted, it is hard to establish valid comparisons. How can we rate indirect interference into the freedom of research at university centres in Western Europe vis-a-vis much more disruptive structural repression of a university in Hungary or the personalised repression of critical academics and students in Turkey and Egypt? Not only are these violations taking place in different political contexts – from liberal democracies in Europe and North America to entrenched authoritarianism in Egypt. The modes and targets of repression also differ: legal, physical and institutional interventions affect individual researchers or faculties in varying ways, or have collective impacts on the freedoms of scholars. How can we systematise the variegated ways by which academic freedom is curtailed?

This article takes the variety of infringements on academic freedom as a reason to systematically engage and develop reliable monitoring tools. Drawing on scholarship about academic freedom in the social sciences and humanities, it outlines the conceptual architecture of a comprehensive Academic Freedom Index (AFI) to measure and compare the restrictions and repressions wrought on researchers. At its core this index documents violations of academic freedom that af-

[2] This realization, in turn, has not lead to a systematic integration of fieldwork training in the fields of personal security or communication protection into the methodological curricula of graduate and post-graduate programs, thus creating the impression that fieldwork controls are installed primarily as a mechanism to limit institutional liabilities.

fect the individual researcher. Hence, this contribution defines academic freedom mainly in a negative way, relating it to the absence of legal, physical, or structural interference by state or non-state actors into a researcher's personal autonomy, independence and integrity (see Marginson 1997). We focus on the researcher, instead of the hosting institution or the broader academic community, because there is a need to relocate the concept of academic freedom back to the individual level: So far, most available conceptualizations are primarily concerned with the state of the academy as a social institution (Barnett 1990). Debates on academic freedom have either remained abstract and centred on research ethics, the boundaries of normative objectivity, or the interplay of academics' rights and responsibilities. Others have been primarily concerned with the structural conditions of academic freedom on a macro level, such as the politicization of knowledge and the varying degree of research autonomy at higher education institutions. In turn, the everyday working conditions of those who make up academia – lecturers, students, independent and mid-career researchers – are fairly absent from the debates. By contrast, in the AFI these individuals take centre stage: It is at the micro level where the effects of repression and restrictions of freedoms are most visible. Hence a reliable monitoring of academic freedom must start there.

We start by addressing the essential theoretical underpinnings for the conceptualization of academic freedom. We review the contemporary literature with regards to its feasibility for operationalization and identify significant gaps, which we hope to fill by proposing the AFI. Consequently, in the second part of this paper, we spell out the methodological path towards reliable and valid parameters for assessing the degree of academic freedom across time and on a cross-country level. It thereby caters to both, qualitative and quantitative scholars. While providing a novel framework for examining and comparing pertinent cases of academic freedom violations in detailed small-n case studies, the developed parameters also form the basis for an aggregated index allowing for large-n cross-country comparison. In turn, this index can function as a guide for identifying new cases worth studying in-depth.

The closing section additionally highlights the AFI's potential as an early warning mechanism for potential human rights violations and stresses its merits as a monitoring and advocacy tool. Listing vantage points for further research, we conclude by sketching out a tentative research agenda for scholars of repression, regimes and social mobilization interested in the study of academic freedom.

2. State of the art

Although the term 'academic freedom' seems self-evident (Scott 2009, p. 451), the debate surrounding it has been marked less by unity than divisions and inconsistencies (Karran 2009b, p. 264; Berdahl et al. 2009; Åkerlind & Kayrooz 2003). Gerber (2001, p. 23) observes that references to academic freedom in public discourse are often rather disingenuous, exhibiting a telling disregard for full meaning of the concept. The evident lack of public awareness for the relevance of a free and independent academia has led experts in the field to call on their colleagues to move beyond theoretical appraisals of the abstract concept of academic freedom and dedicate more time and effort to the provision of 'concrete evidence of the value of the elements of academic freedom: to academics, students, universities and the world at large' (Karran 2009b, p. 264). Nevertheless, scholarship on academic freedom is still characterised by a ubiquitous lack of specificity on the defining features of the concept, an over-concern for the working conditions of academic staff paired with a disregard for the freedom of students, and a high level of abstraction (Latif 2014, p. 399). This has hindered broader dissemination and recognition of academic freedom as a normative value and right on its own – as something that is complementary but distinct from broader notions of freedom of speech or the right to education.[3] Along those lines, Berlin (1969) identified the important distinction between the negative dimension of academic freedom, that is, the absence of constraint on choices, and its positive dimension, that is, the freedom and ability to be 'one's own master'. This differentiation is still crucial: while researchers may be un-

[3] For a timely debate on the doctrinal sources of the concept and the relation between academic freedom and the competing notions of freedom of expression and education see Appiagyei-Atua (2014) and De Baets (2015).

constrained in the choices of research topics, they may nevertheless be unable to undertake their research when resources are deliberately withheld for political reasons. Moreover, some scholars refer solely to the individual level when they speak of academic freedom, while others acknowledge that the term academic freedom needs to encompass the interlinkages between individual, disciplinary and institutional freedoms (Åkerlind & Kayrooz 2003).

Broadly following these cleavages, countless studies have attempted to establish the boundaries of what academic freedom is or should be. The sheer volume of such studies is a testament to the interest of scholars in the conditions of their own profession. There are many bibliographies and guides to the literature (e.g., Aby & Kuhn 2000; Bennett 2011; Karran 2009a; Sinder 1990), over a dozen special issues (e.g., Hayes 2009; Mack 2009; Patterson & Nelson 2010) and a dedicated journal,[4] which all shed light on the topic from different perspectives. In their exploration of the threats and opportunity structures of free research, scholars have engaged with the symbiotic link between academic freedom and free speech (Battaglia 2014; Preece 1991), and the transnational diffusion of solidarity initiatives (Coetzee 2016), and they have retraced the roots and historical trajectory of the concept (Tiede 2014; Karran 2009b). Other scholars have investigated relations between researcher trauma and academic freedom (Loyle & Simoni 2017), and studied the impact of securitising discourses (Caffentzis 2005; Peter & Strazzari 2016), of ethical oversight committees (Nichols 2015; Hedgecoe 2016), of the marketization of higher education (Brown & Carasso 2013; Marginson 1997), and of social media on the freedom of researchers (Poritz 2014). Most recently, the deteriorating conditions in the Middle East have drawn attention to the effects of civil war and authoritarianism on research, with a range of high-profile cases, such as the death sentence against Professors Emad Shahin in Egypt, the criminalization of the 'Academics for Peace' signees in Turkey, or the beheading of Palmyra antiquities chief Khalid al-

[4] American Association of University Professors (AAUP) 2010, *Journal of Academic Freedom*, available at: https://www.aaup.org/reports-publications/journal-academic-freedom.

Asaad by Islamic State militants attracting significant attention (Baser, Akgönül, & Öztürk 2017; Brand 2017; Lake & Parkinson 2017).[5]

While the list of investigated variables impacting on academic freedom has grown continuously, less scholars have focussed on systematic categorization, questions of data collection and operationalization, and the discussion of comparability. As Barnett put it, in their lack of specificity 'traditional discussions of academic freedom, whatever their superficial differences, are also depressingly uniform' (1990, p. 137). Few scholars have presented concise catalogues that map out the defining features of academic freedom and could thus provide the basis for systematic comparative investigation (Latif 2014). One attempt to categorise the concept's essential tenets has been offered by Nelson (2009) in her response to conservative efforts to denigrate academic freedom as a 'magical' term to legitimise controversial research practices. Yet, the sixteen major threats that she identifies are highly contingent on the Anglo-American and European research context and emphasise socio-economic and cultural political developments on the macro level, such as the effects of globalization, religious intolerance or managerial ideologies, which can hardly be operationalised as variables directly impacting the state of academic freedom across cases. Nelson's attempt to map out practical resistance strategies is admirable, yet emblematic of the state of research on academic freedom in different geographical contexts (Karran 2007). Most works deal with academic freedom either one-dimensionally, focusing on a specific threat, or examine the situation in one discrete country or institution (e.g., Mack 2009). In sum, the body of scholarly work can be described as highly particularised.

3. Taking stock of existing measures

One would think that some academics, usually eager to collect data on all sorts of things, would have come up with a way of measuring of their very own

[5] These cases have also notably revived collective efforts to provide comprehensive guidance on physical safety during field research to outgoing researchers. Good primers on how to 'survive' fieldwork in hostile environments are provided, among others, by Sriram, Kapiszewski and their collaborators (Sriram et al. 2009; Kapiszewski, MacLean & Read 2015)

working environment, its socio-political context, and the restrictions they face in their daily work routine. After all,

> 'Academic freedom is [...] to the academic profession what judicial independence is to judges, freedom of conscience to the clergy, the protection of sources of information to the journalist, parliamentary privilege to the MP, the exercise of clinical judgement to the doctor, the right of hot pursuit to the policeman,' as Turner (1988, p. 107) put it.

Curiously this is not the case. While there is a dire need to understand the impact of distinct contextual and relational factors on the conditions of academic freedom, we know hardly anything about them (Latif 2014, p. 400). A comprehensive measure for academic freedom is still conspicuously absent from the multitude of indices measuring individual and collective freedoms, such as Freedom House's Freedom in the World Report (Freedom House 2017), the Polity IV index (Marshall, Jaggers & Gurr 2014), the Bertelsmann foundation's Transformation Index (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2014), or the V-Dem dataset (V-Dem Institute 2017). If they include academic freedom at all, they only do so as a single question item in their expert surveys, usually subsumed under the indicator for freedom of speech and expression. For these surveys, experts are asked to rate the level of academic freedom – in general – on a numerical scale based on the quality and quantity of restrictions to academic freedom. Such a measure is overly simplistic for several reasons. It does not clearly distinguish between the quality of restrictions on academic freedoms or their frequency. Furthermore, it simply provides a conflated and aggregated degree of academic freedom based on the judgment of the selected country experts for any given year, offering very limited horizontal comparability. While these indices provide the only longitudinal data available on academic freedom so far, none of them maps the concept exhaustively and across a large-n basis.

Consequently, researchers interested in cross-national comparative data on threats to academic freedom currently must rely on the New York-based Scholars at Risk (SAR) network for information. To our knowledge, the SAR's publicly available online incident index is the most systematic attempt to collect disaggregated

data on academic freedom violations on a global level (Scholars at Risk 2017). Differentiating between six types of violations from violence to loss of position, the SAR monitor provides greater detail than the mentioned democracy indices and thus valuable points of connection for our index. Regarding methodological standards of data collection, representativeness and replicability, however, the SAR monitor is not well suited for comparative analysis: The primary data behind the SAR index is not available for export and further analyses. It is not coded as time series, which would allow for more advanced quantitative analyses and could feed into a regular assessment of the situation within discrete countries over time. Moreover, the collected SAR data is neither complete, meaning it does not include all violations in the covered countries, nor representative. For instance, in 2015 the SAR monitor identified a total of three incidents for Egypt: it mentions the cases of the imprisoned analyst Alexandrani and of a deported French graduate student as well as the arrest of undergrad student Sherif Gaber for the crime of atheism. However, a comparison with the archives of the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, a respectable Egyptian HRO, reveals a substantially higher rate of academic freedom violations for the same timeframe.

The underreporting stems primarily from the SAR's reliance on a transnational network of higher education professionals for data collection (Cole 2017; Scholars at Risk 2016). Experts in 35 countries monitor specific regions and proactively point out incidents for inclusion in the SAR monitor. Secondary sources, media and NGO reports are not systematically scanned for incidents but drawn upon only for corroboration. Because of this documentation procedure, the number of collected incidents remains limited in scope. Above all, the SAR monitor misses the less visible restrictions, such as intimidation, the denial of funding for contentious research, or censorship. In addition, of those violations that are recorded in a relatively accurate way, all forms of physical violence are merged in the same category. This conflates enforced disappearances, assaults and targeted killings – all violent but still qualitatively different.

4. Triangulating complementary methods of data collection

To address the identified shortcomings, we propose a diversified approach. Methodologically, the AFI relies on a triangulation of different methods of data collection from multiple sources. Above all, the AFI's mixed method approach relies on the combination of event data, large-n questionnaires among academics, and in depth small-n surveys among country experts. The idea behind this integrated research design is to benefit from the distinct complementarities of event analysis for identifying empirical trends and turning points with those of in-depth case study for revealing the driving forces behind such distinctive patterns (Fearon & Laitin 2008, p. 758).

4.1. Event data

Event catalogues have become a routine tool in repression studies for monitoring changes within cases in longitudinal studies.[6] The systematic coding of discrete instances where academics' rights and freedoms are violated across cases increases transparency and comparability by providing a solid measure that is not particularly dependent on subjective interpretation. Event data is especially suited to highlight trends and turning points within cases over time. Moreover, it provides a practical tool to keep track of extra-legal and covert repression, such as forced disappearances or physical violence, which are seldom acknowledged in aggregated repression indicators (Ball 2005) and often remain obscure to the 'naked eye or even to the trained historical mind' (Tarrow 1998, p. 54) of country experts. However, attempts to 'symptomatically' retrace infringements of civil liberties via event data are associated with problems pertaining to a scarcity of sources as well as reporting and selection bias (Barranco & Wisler 1999; Woolley 2000). Especially in authoritarian or conflict scenarios the available information is often generated by competing factions, hence single-sourcing is highly problematic. The AFI thus relies on event data from diverse types of sources, with the SAR-incident monitor providing the

[6] For a comprehensive overview of publicly available repression databases that have been employed in peer-reviewed publications visit Christian Davenport's personal blog at http://staterepression.weebly.com/repression-data.html.

initial vantage point (Scholars at Risk 2017). This account is then solidified with hand-coded data from local and international human rights organizations, as well as crowd sourcing platforms that document abuses on a national or subnational level.[7] To ensure the consistency and reliability of the compiled data, the event catalogue is checked for false positives and the dataset is periodically updated.

4.2. Expert surveys

Interviews with and reports by local expert have a long tradition in estimating levels of freedoms, or the restrictions thereon (Coppedge et al. 2011, p. 248). Most regime type or democracy indices make use of expert surveys and annual country reports by experts to evaluate levels of freedoms or civil rights. It is common practice that two case experts per country are assigned with filling in a standardised survey and drafting a status report. For the AFI, the selected country experts will be recruited from local experts in the field of freedom of expression or academic freedom. Ideally, the expert survey will be reproduced on an annual basis to map longitudinal changes. The assessment process in the expert surveys will be facilitated by a detailed manual including methodological information, a selection of pertinent sources, and detailed question-by-question scoring guidance and thresholds to be consulted by the experts when answering the survey.[8] The essential gain of this second layer of qualitative analysis is compellingly expressed by Denzin and Lincoln: 'Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (2000, p. 3).

[7] In authoritarian contexts, there is usually no alternative to the accounts of repression released by NGOs and crowdsourcing platforms, apart from official statements which, for obvious purposes, usually rather understate abuses. In Turkey, for instance, the *Turkeypurge* crowdsourcing platform currently provides the most comprehensive account of sackings at higher institutions. In Egypt, the event data of *Wiki Thawra* is still the most reliable account of authoritarian repression since 2011.
[8] Examples of existing guidance for analysts that can serve as a template for the AFI expert guidance are provided, for instance, by Freedom House in their expert guidelines for the Freedom in the World and Freedom of the Press indices. A similarly useful and publicly available comprehensive guideline to expert assessments is provided by the Open Data Barometer project at http://opendatabarometer.org/doc/3rdEdition/ODB-3rdEdition-ResearchHandbook.pdf.

4.2. Questionnaires

Large-n questionnaires constitute the third empirical cornerstone for the index. In contrast to the targeted surveys of select experts, the questionnaire targets those who effectively constitute the bulk of higher education bodies, that is, with lecturers, mid-career researchers and PhD students. The basic idea of such an approach is to give voice to precisely those whose working conditions are potentially most affected by restrictions. In a national study on the state of academic freedom in Australia, Åkerlind and Kayrooz (2003) convincingly applied such a survey method. The questionnaires in the countries of interest will ideally be distributed via academic associations and institutions themselves or via their representatives. In addition, colleagues could be approached personally at conferences and via more informal mailing lists. Especially in contexts in which official university e-mail addresses are not widespread, this might be necessary to increase response rates. The representativeness across the spectrum of academics remains the main obstacle to ensure the validity of such survey results. Strategies such as stratified random sampling, which are used in polling or other survey projects, provide helpful tools to reduce selection biases. Due to the usually easy access to mail addresses and phone numbers of academics via websites, phone interviews might also be suitable to reach respondents.

5. Operationalising Academic Freedom

Drawing on these three sources of data, we suggest investigating the conditions facilitating academic freedom in three different dimensions: on a personal, a legal, and an economic level. On each of these levels, violations are further disaggregated. This allows us to study and compare a multitude of infringements of academic freedom, ranging from the extremes of killings and forced disappearances, to the legal repercussions of critical research, to precarious employment practices. In the following paragraphs, we outline the three proposed dimensions and discuss a range of indicators for their operationalisation.

Table 1 - Operationalisation and measurement

Dimensions	Parameters	Data collection
Personal	Killings & forced disappearances	Event data
		Expert survey
		Questionnaire
	Physical violence	Event data
		Expert surveys
		Questionnaire
	Imprisonment	Event data
		Expert survey
		Questionnaire
	Persecution	Event data
		Expert survey
		Questionnaire
	Travel restrictions	Event data
		Expert survey
		Questionnaire
Legal	Legal status	Expert survey
		Questionnaire
	Institutional autonomy	Expert survey
		Questionnaire
	Regulation of appointments	Expert survey
		Questionnaire
	(Self-) censorship	Expert survey
		Questionnaire
	Freedom of association	Expert survey
		Questionnaire
Economic	Pre-emptive/retaliatory discharge	Expert survey
		Questionnaire
	Pre-emptive/retaliatory denial of position	Expert survey
		Questionnaire
	Pre-emptive/retaliatory denial of funding	Expert survey
		Questionnaire

Our negative approach to measuring academic freedom, as the freedom from infringements, rests primarily on documenting and taxonomizing violations. This taxonomy forms the basis for the data collection via expert surveys and large-n questionnaires. Although for researchers, the loss of employment at a public higher education institution due to contentious research is probably a more frequent phenomenon than imprisonment or exposure to violence, arguably the latter constitute

more severe violations of academic freedom. To capture these qualitative differences, we situate the various infringements of academic freedom in each of the three discussed dimensions on a continuum, starting with what we estimate to be the most severe violation. A comprehensive overview of the operationalised dimensions and their corresponding measurement is provided in table 1.

2.1. Personal dimension

At a micro level, violating the personal integrity of a researcher due to their research, publishing or teaching activities is the most fundamental way of undermining academic freedom. We assume that academics –like journalists– are vulnerable to being subjected to infringements of their personal rights, due to the relevance of their work for society and knowledge production. Logically, the higher the number of such incidents in a given country in the year under investigation, the lower the score with respect to the personal dimension of the AFI, indicating a less free academy. This holds true for all the following indicators.

- *Killings and forced disappearances*. If a researcher is killed or abducted and disappeared because of her work, this amounts to the most horrible violation of not just academic freedom but fundamental human rights.
- *Violence*. If researchers are deliberately subjected to physical violence in order to prevent future research engagement, as intimidation or as a punishment for certain behaviour, this constitutes a grave violation of academic freedom.
- *Imprisonment*. If a researcher is imprisoned due to her position of influence as an academic or due to an offense committed in the context of, or related to their work, we consider the imprisonment a violation of academic freedom. The main problem here is how to clarify whether a researcher is illegitimately detained due to her activities as a researcher or rightfully because of other illicit activity. In authoritarian contexts, politicised state prosecutors notably resort to broadly applicable criminal charges to penalise critical researchers. This indicator will thus have to be contextualised in each case.

- *Persecution.* If a researcher is persecuted due to her work, we consider this a violation of academic freedom. Politically motivated persecution, including the filing of legal charges and complaints, public defamation and vilification often serves as an intimidation tactic. As a repressive mechanism persecution is particularly effective since it affects its targets indifferent of the ultimate campaign outcome due to the negative public attention researchers receive. Reputational damage due to allegations or legal charges may bar scholars from advancing in their career and conduct their research. Beyond silencing the targeted researcher, public persecution also sends a warning signal to the broader academy.
- *Travel restrictions.* Researchers often have to travel to conduct fieldwork, or to attend conferences and workshops to exchange results and practices with their peers and engage in scholarly debate. If the mobility of a researcher is limited to ensure that she cannot engage with her peers, we consider this a violation of academic freedom. The indicator includes house arrests as well as entry refusals for foreign researchers.

2.2. Legal dimension

Legal frameworks matter to academic freedom. As Karran (2007, pp. 293-298) has pointed out in his study on academic freedom in Europe, comparative qualitative content analyses of constitutional frameworks, legislation in the educative sector, and penal codes across countries can provide insights on the level of legal protection of academic institutions from political intervention. Likewise, legal regulations for the appointment of academic positions, the bylaws of public universities, and the governance of higher education institutions provide illustrative indicators for the degree of independence of academia (EUA 2016). However, it is not sufficient to build on this formalist assessment alone. Prior work on constitutional protections for academic freedom reveals how violations of academic freedom depend only to a minor degree on constitutional contexts. Indeed, the Scholars at Risk monitor illustrates that in many countries where academic freedom is explicitly guaranteed by the constitution, such as in the Philippines, Mexico or South Africa,

scholars nevertheless have face repercussions for their work (Scholars at Risk 2017). Contrary to common expectation, most consolidated democracies provide comparably little explicit constitutional guarantees for academic freedom. This points not only to a discrepancy between legal norms and legal reality, it also highlights the need to include the interpretation and implementation of legislation into a measure of academic freedom.

- *Legal status of academic freedom*. The status of academic freedom in a national constitution or other relevant basic legislation provides a crucial point of reference for any legal assessment of basic freedoms. National or regional constitutions defining the legal status of academia in the given territory provide a central reference point.
- *Institutional autonomy and self-governance*. However, the relevant legislation and regulations on research extend beyond abstract constitutional guarantees. Karran (2007, pp. 300ff.) analysed the regulations governing appointments of university deans and rectors as a proxy for institutional autonomy and self-governance in academic institutions. We consider this an insightful indicator but also want to urge our experts to take the more day-to-day decision-making processes in the higher education context into account. Representation of diverse groups within a university in decision-making bodies is another indicator for more inclusive governance. However, more importantly, the absence of interference by the state and government or, for example, religious institutions in regulations regarding the universities remains central to measuring the institutional autonomy of academic institutions.
- *Regulation on appointing research staff*. The freedom of interference by state actors or shareholders into the appointments of positions at public and private higher education institutions is a central indicator for institutional independence from political or other influences. Country experts will assess the legal regulations on the national level and on other levels where relevant (Karran 2007, pp. 303–304).

- *(Self)censorship*. Censorship and self-censorship as important mechanisms of control over research, publications and teaching are crucial to assessing the status of academic freedom. Similarly, 'political correctness' may influence what contents that scholars are willing and able to publish (Preece 1991, p. 33). Unlike in the arts, however, censorship and self-censorship of the press or academia tends to be underreported, with a high estimated number of unreported cases: if people adhere to censorship measures in the first place, it often also entails confidentiality on this act of obedience. Through the anonymous survey amongst academic professionals we hope to get a sense of the extent to which, both, imposed censorship measures self-censorship limit researchers' room of manoeuvre.
- *Freedom of Association*. Restrictions or even bans on political organizations or unionization of students or faculty are considered a violation of academic freedom, whereas open regulations on political and professional associations on campus are regarded as compatible with the principles of independence of academics and students.

2.1. Economic dimension

The economic dependence of researchers on public (and thus state controlled) funds is usually high. If precarious employment in combination with dependence on entirely national public funds is the norm this can negatively influence the ability of researchers to conduct research on issues they see as important and impacts their ability to forgo their profession without having to worry about basic needs

- *Pre-emptive/retaliatory discharge*. If a researcher loses her position or a student gets expelled from an institution due the content of her academic work we consider this a violation of academic freedom. Expecting that the reasons for dismissals often remain undisclosed or are formally unrelated to the investigation topics of affected researchers, this indicator relies heavily on the personal experience and assessment of local experts. While academic institutions' personnel policy is al-

ways a contested matter and discriminatory practices usually difficult to discern, we urge our experts to pay attention to politicised cases where political interference is assumed to be behind an expulsion.

- *Pre-emptive/retaliatory denial of position.* If tenure track employment or fixed-term contract positions allows the research and teaching staff at academic institutions to conduct both research and teaching more independently and with less worry about the political repercussions of their work, we associate the pre-emptive or retaliatory denial of such positions with a less academic freedom. In a similar vein, the research related refusal of professional promotion affects academic freedom by curtailing the financial security of the targeted scholar. As political interference with appointments at academic institutions does not necessarily happen via formal channels only, this indicator also includes informal pressure over nomination processes.
- *Pre-emptive/retaliatory denial of funding.* Funding of research and higher education is central to academic freedom on a structural level. It is assumed that a diversification of funding for projects across various levels of government, state independent associations, and private foundations ensure less control over and thus a less constrained research process. Likewise, decentralised public funding institutions at central levels of governance guarantee a minimum level of insulation against direct political interference through public financing mechanisms (Baker 2006, pp. 8–16; Becker, Vlad & Nusser 2007, p. 6; Price 2002). If funding is denied to employees in higher education teaching and research due to the critical nature of their proposed research, or as the result of prior academic activity, we consider this an infringement of academic freedom.

6. Concept relations and data aggregation

Certainly, the strategies by which authorities attempt to curtail researchers' room of manoeuvre are situational and highly context-specific. These nuances and grey areas between the proposed categories can be discerned only through intensive qualitative study. The proposed taxonomy can effectively guide the data collection

process in such an endeavour. However, these categories can also form the conceptual backbone of larger comparative analyses whose foci transcend the intricacies of individual cases. Hence, based on the introduced classification system, we aim to establish a continuous index value at the country-year level.

The units of analysis in this index are the infringements of academic freedom recorded across the introduced three dimensions. In our operationalization of academic freedom, we have put forward five distinct indicators for the personal and the legal dimension respectively, and three for the economic dimension. In a first step, we propose assigning a numerical value to each of these parameters on a five-point interval scale, with a score of five representing no infringements and a score of zero indicating frequent and severe violations. In a second step, we propose an additive aggregation which weighs all respective indicators equally. The aggregation rules correspond with the concept relations (Goertz 2005, p. 111). Following this logic, the index scores for the personal and legal dimensions can range from 0 to 25, and for the economic dimension from 0 to 20. The overall index score for academic freedom in a country could thus nominally range from a rock bottom low of zero points to an ideal type of 65 possible points.

A single aggregate measure for assessing academic freedom in a country at a certain time, albeit particularly useful for comparisons across time and space and advocacy also harbours some pitfalls. Above all, the exclusive reliance on additive aggregation of the scores for the three dimensions carries the risk of producing flawed comparative rankings: for instance, a country's underperformance with a view to some indicators (at worst, those measuring severe violations, such as killings) may be offset by their good performance as regards others. As a basis for valid cross-country and longitudinal comparison, we therefore introduce several thresholds and qualifications, contending that not all dimensions of academic freedom carry equal weight for its overall assessment:

In line with our prior argument that infringements on the personal and legal level are qualitatively different than those on the economic level (Goertz 2005, pp. 95–115) we propose minimum threshold values for the personal and legal di-

mension as a necessary (albeit insufficient) condition for a country case to be considered as free.[9] An additional qualitative threshold is introduced on the level of the parameters for the personal dimension: physical violence against researchers or forced disappearances immediately disqualify a country from being considered as respectful of academic freedom. In other words, in addition to satisfying the threshold for the personal and legal dimension, maximum scores of 5 (no infringements) for the two indicators *killings and forced disappearances* and *violence* are necessary preconditions for a country to be categorized as 'free'. The same principle applies to the indicators *institutional autonomy* and *regulation of appointments* within the legal dimension, and the indicator *pre-emptive/retaliatory discharge* within the economic dimension. Strong performances with a view to these parameters are regarded as indispensable prerequisites for free research. With these qualifications we aim to control, at least partly, for the distortions that might potentially result from the quantification of the nuanced empirical data in an aggregate numerical measure.

7. Integrating different data formats

The integration of the several data sources will be one of the most difficult tasks of this project. Other freedom indices usually rest their assessment solely on either large-n survey (Reporters Without Borders 2017) or on expert scores (Freedom House 2017), or on event data in the case of violence (Wood & Gibney 2010). In turn, in aggregate indices that rely on multiple methods of data collection, these three sources do not easily fit on comparable scales. However, as we envisage structuring both the expert survey and the large-n questionnaire according to the same indicators, integrating their results is possible: the results of the large-n survey items can be translated into numerical values on an ordinal scale, so that the results can be aggregated with ordinal data from the expert surveys to form a combined score.

In turn, the event database provides nominal data that will have to be aggregated on an imputed interval scale to ensure data compatibility. For each indica-

[9] The thresholds' actual metrics will be informed by the results of pilot studies and are yet to be determined.

tor, the country's yearly index score derives from the sequential integration of these data sources: For instance, if a country is to achieve a high score for the indicator 'persecution', first, it must not overstep a certain (low) threshold of (few) cases recorded in the event catalogue. A high aggregated index score, additionally requires a positive assessment by experts which signals no major infringements. Along the lines of prior indices that assess press freedom (Becker, Vlad & Nusser 2007) or democracy (Pemstein, Meserve & Melton 2010), a detailed expert guide will transparently outline the yardsticks for each of the indicators and their numerical scores.[10] Finally, in order to be assessed 'free' of persecution, the large-n survey amongst academics will have to show that the research community does not feel endangered by persecution.

Ultimately, defining conceptually meaningful and empirically useful thresholds will remain a central task that cannot be solved at this point. Threshold values will have to take the distribution of primary data into account. As Coppedge et al. stress, only an inductive approach 'allow[s] for the incorporation of diverse data sources and may provide uncertainty estimates for each point score' (2011, p. 250). Above all, it allows for useful differentiation between cases according to empirically observed differences. However, this effectively presupposes primary data collection, which lies beyond the scope of this contribution.

6. Conclusion

In an attempt to overcome the lack of systematic comparative engagement with global infringements of academic freedom, this paper has laid the conceptual groundwork for an Academic Freedom Index. The AFI goes beyond civil liberty indices, which have treated the issue of academic freedom merely as a secondary item of freedom of speech. The aim of introducing such a dedicated measure is threefold.

[10] Experts will be assessed individually through an anchoring vignette in which they grade one or more fictitious country cases. The results of these anchors are then used to control the graders personal bias (King & Wand 2007).

First, on a theoretical level, we aim to close a conceptual gap in the literature by linking the prolific scholarship on the nature and effects of repression to research on the interrelation of academic freedom and social development. The proposed index would allow scholars to conduct empirically grounded comparative research on hitherto under-researched issues: When and how does the curtailment of academic freedom occur? Are restrictions of academic freedom a clear warning sign that other human rights violations will likely follow suit? (see Gohdes & Carey 2017) What is the impact of restricting academic freedom on the broader societal context, including economic prosperity, regime type, or the level of politicization? How does it affect processes of transition and social transformation? To answer these and other crucial questions we need a reliable and continuous, and context-independent measure that can be applied across time and space.

This article intends to provide a vantage point for conceptual and methodological debates. This includes critically discussing the proposed taxonomy, indicators and methods, as well as suggestions for pilot studies. To test our model empirically, we propose to study, in a first step, a limited selection of ideal type cases from various regions. Aware of the limitations of attaching numerical values to a complex multi-layered and context-sensitive social phenomenon such as the state academic freedom, it is our conviction that any aggregate index should be informed by (and ideally be paired with) detailed qualitative case study. Such a small-n study would allow us to assess the feasibility of the various conceptual building blocks, the mixed-method approach and the operationalization strategy.

Second, on a practical level, we contend that the AFI could serve as a tool for advocacy and mobilization around issues related to academic freedom, first and foremost its infringements. Such an index allows us to extrapolate patterns of types and frequency of violations of academic freedom and could serve as a tool for mobilising against the worsening situation. Like press freedom indices that are being used by journalists and analysts to highlight problematic trends in the repression of journalists our index could serve such a function for academia. Echoing calls for engaged scholarship (Kunkel & Radford-Hill 2011; Lange 2016), a publicly available

AFI dataset and yearly reports might become also a powerful resource for advocacy and resistance, evidence based policy advice, and the mobilization of solidarity with and public support for scholars affected by repression.

Third, and in contrast to Donoghue's (2009) provocative claim that academic freedom 'doesn't matter', we hold that the development of sound and reliable measuring tools for the state of academic freedom is crucial, because academic freedom is crucial for human development. The freedom of research, publication and teaching plays a key role in fostering democratic values, the promotion of human rights and the development of effective public policy (Bryden & Mittenzwei 2013; Cole 2017; Tierney & Lechuga 2010). A recent article by Rittberger and Richardson (2017) in solidarity with CEU tangibly illustrates what happens when academic freedom is not defended: devoid of intro, argument and conclusion, their publication was little more than an empty page. For academic freedom to flourish, however, a consensus is needed that its defence is beneficial not just to university staff and students, but to the world at large (Karran 2009b, p. 277). Hence our hope is that a comprehensive index, paired with in-depth case studies, could broaden empirical research on the restriction of academic freedoms, but also contribute to public awareness raising, foster an interdisciplinary collective identity among researchers, and promote the idea of academic freedom as not only an abstract value but an everyday practice.

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